NCA

VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5676 MARCH 30, 1978
DOUGLAS ROBERTS/BEIRUT

LEBANON PALESTINIANS

ANNCR:

IN THE WAKE OF THE ISRAELI OFFENSIVE AGAINST PALESTINIAN GUERRILLAS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON OBSERVERS IN BEIRUT ARE ASKING THEMSELVES WHAT THE INVASION HAS MEANT BOTH POLITICALLY AND MILITARILY FOR THE PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION. DOUG ROBERTS HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT FROM THE LEBANESE CAPITAL:

VOICE:

GUERRILLA CASUALTIES IN THE FIGHTING WERE COMPARATIVELY LIGHT -- A FEW HUNDRED AT MOST -- AND ANALYSTS HERE BELIEVE THE PALESTINIAN ARSENAL IS STILL LARGELY INTACT. THE GUERRILLAS LOST CONSIDERABLE STORES OF WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION, SAID ONE DIPLOMAT HERE, BUT, HE ADDED, THEY HAVE PLENTY TO SPARE.

THE MORALE OF THE GUERRILLAS WAS HIGH, EVEN AT THE HEIGHT OF ISRAELI ONSLAUGHT. THEY WERE OUTNUMBERED BY AT LEAST TEN TO ONE, ACCORDING TO MOST ESTIMATES HERE, AND THEY FACED VASTLY SUPERIOR FIREPOWER WITH ISRAELI BOMBERS TOTALLY UNCHALLENGED IN THE SKIES ABOVE THE HILLY BATTLEGROUNDS.

CLEARLY, SAY ANALYSTS HERE, THE MAIN LOSS FOR THE PLO WAS TERRITORY. FOR NEARLY EIGHT YEARS, EVER SINCE THE GUERRILLAS WERE DRIVEN OUT OF JORDAN, SOUTH LEBANON WAS THEIR LAST FREE BASE OF OPERATIONS. THERE HAVE BEEN FEW, IF ANY, ATTACKS ON ISRAEL FROM THE REGION OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS. BUT THAT SEEMS MORE THE RESULT OF PALESTINIAN INVOLVEMENT IN THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR THAN ANY MORATORIUM ON CROSS BORDER RAIDS DECLARED BY THE P.L.O. LEADERSHIP.

THE GUERRILLAS HAD MANY BASES IN SOUTH LEBANON, STRETCHING FROM THE MOUNTAINOUS ARCHUB REGION IN THE EAST, KNOWN AS FATAHLAND, TO WITHIN A FEW KILOMETERS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN COAST, ALONG WITH THE PORT OF TYRE, A MAJOR RECEIVING POINT FOR ARMS AND AMMUNITION FROM ABROAD. BUT NOW MOST OF THOSE BASES, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF TYRE, ARE IN ISRELI HELD TERRITORY. THE BULK OF THE GUERRILLA FORCES CAMPED IN A NARROW STRIP OF LAND BETWEEN THE LITANI RIVER AND TERRITORY CONTROLLED BY ARAB LEAGUE PEACEKEEPING FORCES FARTHER TO THE NORTH.

PALESTINIAN LEADERS SAY THE GUERRILLAS WILL RETURN TO THEIR SOUTHERN BASES AND CONTINUE THEIR STRIKES INTO ISRAEL. BUT THIS REMAINS TO BE SEEN. UNITED NATIONS PEACEKEEPING FORCES ARE NOW MOVING INTO THE AREA, AND ISRAEL SAYS IT WILL NOT ALLOW THE GUERRILLAS BACK INTO THE BORDER ZONE. THE BEIRUT GOVERNMENT IS ALSO CLEARLY ANXIOUS TO FORE STALL ANY FURTHER GUERRILLA RAIDS INTO ISRAEL FROM LEBANESE TERRITORY. AND LEBANON HAS LAUNCHED A FULLSCALE PROGRAM TO REBUILD THE COUNTRY'S ARMED FORCES SO THAT IT CAN EXTEND ITS CONTROL OVER ALL PARTS OF THE NATION.

THERE ARE ALSO QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT THE INVASION WILL MEAN FOR THE P-L-O IN THE CONTEXT OF MID-EAST PEACE EFFORTS. GUERRILLA LEADERS MADE NO SECRET OF THE FACT THAT THIS MONTH'S TERRORIST RAID INSIDE ISRAEL THAT PROVOKED THE ISRAELI OFFENSIVE WAS DESIGNED TO SABOTAGE PRESIDENT ANWAR SADAT'S PEACE INITIATIVE. P-L-O LEADER YASSER ARAFAT, IN AN INTERVIEW WITH NEWSWEEK MAGAZINE, SAID THE EGYPTIAN LEADER'S INITIATIVE DIED WHEN ISRAELI TROOPS AND TANKS CROSSED INTO LEBANON.

JS/PY